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A decision to expand services at the North Chicago Veterans Affairs Medical Center got a boost this week, thanks to a \$13 million federal grant for a new surgery center and larger emergency room.

The improvements will strengthen an agreement between the Great Lakes Naval Hospital and the North Chicago hospital, which had been threatened with a possible closing five years ago.

"The great thing about what's happened so far is nobody's talking about closing North Chicago anymore," said U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk (R-Ill.), who helped broker the partnership. "We're just talking about how quickly we can expand it."

After the VA threatened to shut down the North Chicago facility in 1999, Congress agreed in 2001 to allow the Navy and the VA to share some medical services.

An estimated 50,000 veterans in Lake and McHenry Counties would have had to travel to Milwaukee or Chicago for health services if the 500-bed North Chicago VA facility had closed.

The Naval Hospital, which the Department of Defense originally scheduled for a \$140 million renovation, serves recruits at the Great Lakes Naval Station in North Chicago, the Navy's only boot camp.

As part of the joint venture, the Navy began transferring patients to the North Chicago hospital for mental health services a year ago.

"Having the Great Lakes Naval Hospital and the North Chicago VA within a mile of each other is an opportunity to share resources so we're able to save money and provide better service," VA

spokesman Doug Shouse said.

Construction of four new operating rooms with recovery room beds and an improved emergency room with 14 new examination rooms is scheduled to begin in spring, officials said.

Naval surgical teams eventually will be assigned to the VA hospital, officials said.

By 2007, the Navy would like to build a medical facility for outpatient services near the medical center.

Construction of a \$1.3 million women's health clinic, providing pediatric services, also is part of the \$160 million joint venture, officials said.